The Elizabethan Stage

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The modern stage has reached perfection as far as scenery and modern contrivances are concerned. But is it as educational as we would desire it to be? Surely we must often question today whether the drama belongs to the state mechanism or the stage mechanism to the stage drama. One of the reasons why the modern stage is less educational than could be wished is that it is more spectacular than it used to be; in ever so many ways it now appeals to the eye more than to the ear. The scenery detracts the attention from the moral lesson, and the stage furniture is made not so much for useful purposes as for what the comic actor may do with it. The splendor of modern scenery makes it a question of less importance who may or may not be the Romeo or the Juliet.

Notice the contrast between a stage performance in Shakspere's time and our splendid productions. We have developed an extraordinary technical skill, but the decline of the drama may in a great measure be attributed to this movement. The attention of the audience is ~~not~~ directed to the painter rather than to the work of the dramatist, whose small creations are

often almost lost amid the marvelous affects of light and shade on our gigantic stage. Shakspere never lost sight of the importance of costume and stage effect. His methods called for an accurate mounting and costuming of every piece. He delighted in an artistic picture for the eye to dwell upon, but he never lost sight of its relative importance. It was first to the ears of his audience that his drama was meant to appeal. The audience of that age was trained to comprehend that which was " written with the voice", for they "read with the ear", instead of with opera-glass.

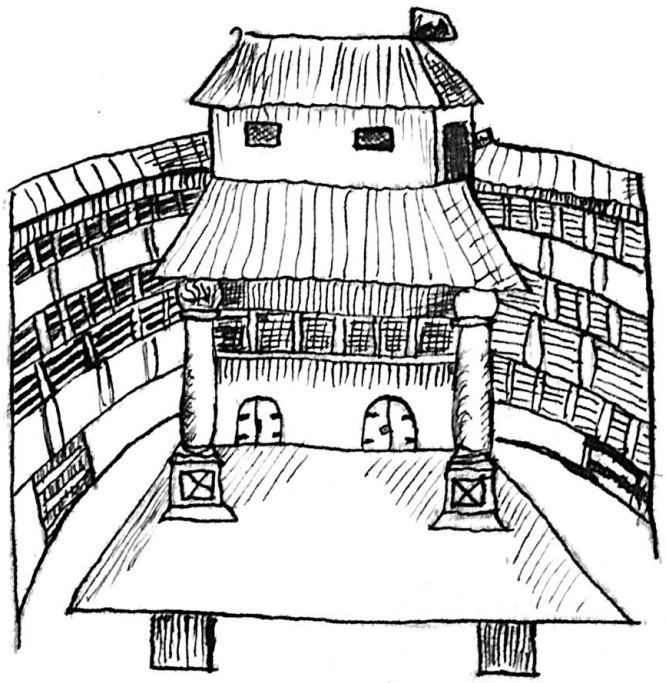
The scholarly world has held a low opinion of Elizabethan stagecraft however. "In all that is external and mechanical", syas Bowden, "the theatre was still conparatively rude". "There was nothing", John Addington Symonds remarks, "but the rudest scenery".n Cooleridge is even more contemptuous. "The stage in Shakspere's time was a naked room, hung with a blanket for a curtain."

The Elizabethan's amusement faculty was concentrated upon the theatres of the Bankside, and the great money must have been used in this direction. English travelers found the foreigh theatres "beggardly" in comparison; The dresses incomparably meaner, and the music, dances, and ensemble altogether inferior. The mid-day meal concluded, cwowds of people moved instinctively toward the Strand to see what flags were

flying across the river. There with such additional information has could be gleaned from the posts or the book-shops they went over in armadas in the direction of the Hope, the Swan, Paris Garden, or the Globe. In favorable weather the English theatres were crowded and the applause enthusiastic. With the exception of very distinguished persons, the audience seem all to have paid at one door,-- "the gatherer", often an actor's wife, being probably the only woman employed in the place. The vast majority of the Elizabethan audience was composed of men who ate nuts and apples. Tobacco was the privilege of the fine gentlemen in boxes above the heads of the groundlings, who stood on the bare eatth in the circular yard. Accomodation between these two was provided in"two-penny rooms", which in luxurious houses, such as the Globe and the Fortune were furnished with benches. The order of the day for Elizabethans was external luxury running riot. The actors, as records show, rivalled the court itself. We find that the highest price Henslowe paid for a play up to 1600 was eight pounds, the lowest being four; but for a pair of hose he paid four pounds and fourteen shillings, and for a cloak twenty pounds. Henslowe's inventory of the apparel of the Lord Admiral's men lists eighty-seven garments, mainly of silk or satin, with gold lace and fringe, and often of cloth of gold. Is it likely that a theatre in which such garments were displayed can be described as a naked room

hung with a blanket?

In 1888 a Berlin professor discovered a contempory sketch of the Swan theatre made by a Dutch visitor to London in or about 1596. Hohannes DeWitt was a young Dutch noble who wandered from city to city in western Europe making notes on the peculiarâties and characteristics of the various peoples. These notes have been missing since DeWitt's death in Italy in 1622, and only a few fragments, sketches, and notes in Latin were perserved by his friends and correspondentsA. Van Buchell; among these notes in the library of DeWitt's native city Utrecht, Gaedertz discovered in 1888 a drawing of the interior of Swan theatre as it appeared about 1596. This drawing was not DeWitt's original, but a rough copy made of it by his friend. The original itself was probably drawn from memory and was designed expressly to show a supposed resemblance between the theatres of London in 1596 and those of antiquity.



A short explanation in Latin was appended to this sketch. "There are in London four theatres (amphitheatra) of noteworthy beauty..... The largest and most noteworthy is that whereof the sign in a Swan commonly called the Swan theatre. Its seats (in sedilibus admitat) three thousand persons, is built of a concrete of flint stones (constructum exconaccruato lapide pyrritide), which abound in Briton and is supported by wooden columns painted in such excellent imitation of marble that the accutest might not nose out the deception. Since its form seems to approach that of a Roman structure,I have depicted it above". That it seated three thousand and that it was built of concrete , seem errors. Professor George P. Baker of Harvard has suggested that it was a half-timbered structure filled in with plaster which DeWitt mistook for concrete. In considering the size of the building we find in records that several of the London buildings seated from two thousand to two thousand five hundred people, so that DeWitt's estimate was not an entire guess.

Although certain details of the Swan picture are inexplicable, it remains an important document and it has started many theories concerning the stage. One of these theories is upheld by several writers; Kilian, Genie, Brandl and other writers in the Shakespeare Jahrbuch and Englisch Studien; set forth more explicitly by Brodmeier in his Die Shakespeare Bühne (1904); and

more tentatively by Mr. W. W. Greg in an independent study of Webster's White Devil. It is to the effect that most of the action was done in alternate scenes upon the front stage, which extended into the auditorium like the lower half of a capital A, and the rear stage, which was partitioned off by a curtain or a traverse working upon a rod between fixed pillars -- these pillars supporting the shadow or peaked roof of tile which forms such a prominent feature in the Swan drawing. This rear scene was used exclusively when the curtains were drawn aside, for discovered scenes, scenes in which properties are employed, and in which arras, a balcony, doors, or artificial lights came into play. Between every scene on the rear or inner stage (the plays being acted continuously without any waits) a scene on the front or outer stage had to be interposed. There was no furniture used on this outer stage; it was used for roads, streets, a blasted heath, or a portion of a battle-field. At the back of the rear stage were two or perhaps more often three doors leading into the player's tiring room behind. Above was a balcony. But the exact purpose and position of this balcony has been much debated. Did it look over the rear stage from behind? If so, when the curtains were drawn it was hidden from the audience; a circumstance which precludes altogether as a stage box or " lord's room", as described by Jonson and Dekker.

There have been rival sketches discovered of the early Caroline stages -- one on the title page of William Alabaster's Roxana in 1632, the other on the title page of Richard's Tragedy of Messalina in 1640 In these drawings the balcony is certainly not behind, but above the rear stage-- a postion which is quite fatal to the alternative theory of Brodmeier. Doctor Brandl has in the Deutsche Rundschu (April, 1905) given a picture of the alternation system in action. At the back part of the stage there was, not merely a balcony, but a whole upper story supported on pillars (in the Swan theatre, 1596, it had six windows). It served for the walls of a town, for the private apartments of a palace, for apparitions or ghosts, for a rostrum or a tower. It permitted the night scene in Romeo and Juliet, where the heroine takes the potion, to be played with a perfection of illusion never attained today. "It is evening. Juliet enters her room alone. There follows the soliloquy of despair, the drinking of the potion, the falling asleep. Below Lady Capulet and the nurse and the twenty cooks are preparing the wedding banquet. At three A. M. Lord Capulet enters, makes joke, hurries them up, having no idea that his child lies th all appearance dead in the room above. It is morning. The mother sends the nurse up to call Juliet. The cries of the servant bring the parents into the bedroom. Thus above horror and

distress prevail, while below, in the street before the palace, the bride-groom comes along with musicians ready to accompany the bride joyfully to church. What a contrast of atmosphere on the two stages! The grief of misfortune in the palace is hidden by the curtain but the musicians stopped in front of it in the street, begin to play their instruments; the clowns jesting preserves the balance".

This theory of alternation is interesting and suggestive, but it is a long step to say that it is the underlying principle of all Elizabethan stagecraft. Two much reliance has been put upon this picture which is merely a rough memory sketch. The stage was probably divided into a front stage uncovered, and a covered portion overhung by the "shadow" depicted by DeWitt. The actors drew into this when the rain threatened those georgous costumes for which nearly two hundred pounds was paid. Under this "shadow" the heavy properties were naturally employed. The traverse was run along the under surface of the balcony, thus enclosing a shallow alcove or corridor, at the back of which was the middle exit. "Discovered" or error scenes comparatively few in number, were played in this recess. Above ran a long range of gallery, projecting somewhat, perhaps, at either end -- muscians on one side, the stage box, or lord's room on the other, a compartment in the center being reserved for the actors. Here were enacted

hangings and haranguings, apparitions and ghosts shown, and possibly the balcony scene in Romeo and Juliet played, though on the other hand, a special structure may have been built for this.

There is varied opinion as to the decoration of the stage. Dowden, in his Shakspere Primer, says: "Of movable scenery there was none". "Shakspere", says George Brandes, "made no attempt at illusive decoration". Sidney Lee in his Life of Shakspere says: "Scenery was not known to the Elizabethan stage". But Dowden in his Introduction to Shakspere says: " Stage properties were numerous, rocks and tombs, stairs and steeples, banks and bay-trees". John Addington Symonds, in his Predeeessors speaks of "a battlemented city wall behind the stage". The Elizabethans used pictorial decorations. The accounts of the city and corporation of Canterbury record that in 1501-1502 the occasion being a performance of The Three Kings of Colyn, "A castle made of painted canvas was erected in the room by way of scenery". The revel accounts of 1581 when Shakspere was still a lad at Stratford, made record of "a storie of Pompey enacted in the hall on Twelf-night wherein was ymploied newe one great citie, a senate house, etc.".

In theatres like the Swan, the Fortune, and the Globe, the stage was a platform extending to the middle of the pit, so that the spectators could view

it from all points of the compass, except only the narrow surface separating the stage from the tiring room--and this, at least after 1600 was at times invaded by the public. No proseenium arch was possible, no wings and no flys. But in spite of this construction, we find that painted cloths were used. In many plays, some direct mention is made in the speeches of the characters to the scene in which they appear, and it is upon these allusions that the only basis for the use of painted curtains can be established. In Robert Daborn's The Poor Man's Comfort, we have the lines

"..... below yon hanging rock
The bodies lie of many Ship wrackt Gentlemen."

A few lines before this Catz says: "You're in a wood yet." It may be possible that this last line was merely spoken to give the audience the surroundings, but it hardly seems probable that Adelez would amke such a pointed reference to a rock that was not actually seen by the audience. In The Woman Hater, Lazarello asks; "Boy whereabouts are we?" The boy replies "

"Sir by all tokens this is the house, bawdy
I am sure by the broken windows."

A scene or two later, "enter Oriana and her waiting maid; looke out at a window." Here they could very well look out one of the doors, or perhaps draw the arras a little to one side, but by the earlier lines we see that there must have been have been some representation of broken

windows. Of course it is possible that the stage carpenter came in and nailed some boards across one of the doors but doesn't it seem more reasonable to suppose that such a thing would have been as unpleasant to the Elizabethan audience as to the 20th century audience? Among Henslowe's list of belongings we find "The sittie of Rome", and "The cloth of the sone and the mone", which may have been used under the gallery to picture the heavens.

The use of curtains has called forth many opinions. Front curtains had long been known. The revel accounts for 1573-1574 read: "John Rosse, for poles and shyvers for draift of curtins before revel house, 25s." In 1581, "Pompey's Senate House" had eight ells of double sarcenet for curtains". A traverse or an arras is often called for but only as the hanging of alcove, balcony or box--as , for example, the curtain that shuts Juliet from view after she has taken the potion, and Desdemona when she is dead. It would scarcely have been possible for gallants to sit on stools on the stage, if anything like a front curtain was employed. The strongest evidence that there was nothing of the sort is the fact that when characters were killed on the stage it was the almost universal custom to provide some means in the action for removing theri bodies, as Hamlet made way with Polonius, and Falstaff with Hotspur.

The Elizabethans seem to have been very proficient in their mechanical devices, and they must have produced great effects. We find mentioned flames of fire and blazing stars; and thunder and lightening was produced. In The Devil's Charter, by Barnabe Barnes, we find these elaborate directions for the dumb-show at the beginning of the play:

"Francis G. with a silver rod mooveth the ayre three times. Enter at one doore betwixt the other cardinals, Roderigo in his purple habit close in conference with them, on of which he guideth to a Tent, where a Table is furnished with diversebagges of money, which that Cardinell beareth away: and to another Tent the other Cardinall, where he deliverth him a great quantity of riche Plate, imbraces with joyning of hands. Exeunt Card. Manet Roderigo. To whom from another place a Moncke with a magicall booke and rod, in private whispering with Roderick, whome the monke draweth to a chaire on midst of the stage which he circleth, and before it another Circle into which (after semblance of reading with exorcisms) appeare exhalations of lightening and sulphurous smoke in midst whereof a devil in most ugly shape: from which Roderigo turneth his face, hee being conjured downe after more thunder and fire, ascends another devill like a Sargent with a mace under his girdle: Roderigo disliketh. Hee descendeth: after more thunder and fearefull fire, ascend in robes pontificall with a

tripall Crowne on his head, and Crosse keys in his hand: A divill him ensuing in blacke robes like a pronotory, a cornered Cappe on his head, a box of daucats at his girdle, a little peece of fine parchment in his hands, who being brought unto Alexander, hee willingly receiveth him; to whome hee delivereth the wryting, which seeming to reade presently the Pronotory strippeth up Alexander's sleeve and letteth his arme bloud in a saucer, and having taken a peece from the Pronotory, subscribeth to the parchment: delivereth it: the remainder of the bloud the other divill seemeth to suppe up: and from him disrobede is put the rich Cappe the Tunicke, and the triple Crowne set upon Alexander's head, the Crosse-keys delivered into his hands; and withall a magicall booke: this donne with thunder and lightening the divills descend: Alexander advanceth himselfe, and departeth."

A little farther on in the play "A fiery exhalations lightening thunder ascend a King with a red face crowned imperiall riding upon a Lyon, or dragon." Again, "The divell descendeth with thunder and lightening, and after more exhalations ascends another all in armour."

In the Revenger's Tragedy, by Cyrill Tourneur we have the following: "In a dumshow, the possessing of the young Duke, with all his Nobles: then sounding Musick. A furnished Table is brought forth: then enters the Duke and his Nobles to the banquet. A blazing star appeareth."

A little later, the "Revengers daunce. At the ende, steal out their swords, and these foure kill the foure at the Table, in their Chairs. It thunders." Vaults and caves are used in "The Wonder of Women" by John Marston. "Zanthia descends the vault." A little later, "Enter Sophanisba and Zanthia as out of the cave's mouth." "Through the vautes mouth in his nightgowne, torch in hand, Syphax enters just behind Sophanisba."

Shops were usually represented on the stage by having a few wares around. In Amends for Ladies by Nathaniel Field, we have a shop for general merchandise. "Enter Seldom, his wife Grace, working as in their shop.

Grace. Husband, these gloves are not fit for my wearing; I'll put'em into the shop and sell'em."

In the play The Fleire by Edward Sharpam, "enter Segnior Alunio, the Apothecarie in his shop with wares about him.

Alunio. What's this? O, this is Arringus; this makes the old man able, and the young man lusty, etc. ..... What's this? O, this is the spirit of Roses ....."

In the Honest Whore by Thomas Dekker, "enter Candidoes' wife, George, and the two Prentices in the shop.

Wife. Come you, put up your wares in good order here, do you not think you, one peece cast this way, another that way? you had need have a patient maister indeed."

Some gentlemen enter:

All three. Gentlemen, what do you lack? what ist you buy? See fine hollands, fine cambricks, fine lawnes."

When it was practicable to have the wares around the walls the occupant of the shop is usually working at his trade, as the cobbler in The Case is Altered by Ben Jonson. "Juniper, Cobbler, is discovered is discovered sitting at work in his shoppe and singing". A study was also shown in many of the plays. Probably this was arranged behind the curtains at the back of the stage. In The Woman Hater by Fletcher, Lazarello and two Intelligencers enter, Lucio being at his study; and then The Secretary draws the curtain. In The Devil's Charter, we find "Alexander embraced betwixt two Cardinalls in his study looking upon a booke, whilst a groome draweth a Curtaine". The study is furnished with "bookesp coffers, and his triple Crowne upon a cushion before him," and" he tincketh a bell."

When banquet scenes were to be given, tables were brought in by servants. Henslowe makes the following note: "pd. for bordes & quarters & naylles for to macke a tabell & a coffen for the playe of the lll brothers the 22 octob 1602 some of XII s III d ". The people sat at these tables on stools most of the time, but if some little distinction was granted them, they sat in chairs. In A Woman is a Weathercock by Nathaniel Field, we have the stage directions: "Enter Two or three, setting three or four chairs, and four or five stools. Lady Ninny offers at two or three chairs; at last finds the great one." When a person of some importance was in the room,

in many plays, this person sat in a chair, as in The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington by Anthony Munday; " presently Ely ascends the chair". People were also brought in in chairs, as, "enter Strozza, brought in a Chaire". Several " exeunt bearing Sophonisba in a Chaire".

The out-of-door scenes seemed to have been represented as naturally as it was possible. Trees are mentioned many times. In The Arraignment of Paris by George Peele, mention is made in the stage directions of two people sitting under a tree. In Love's Metamorphosis by John Lilly, Eris says, "I will destroy this tree in despite of all". Nisa replies "Let him alone: but see, the tree powreth out blood, and I heare a voice." Marston, in the Parasitaster gives the following stage directions: "Whilest the Act is a playing, Hercules and Tiberionenter, Tiberio climes the tree, and is received above by Dulcimel, Philocahia and a Priest: Hercules stayes beneath." In The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe by George Peele, "Absolom hangs by the haire." While he is hanging he makes a speech which ends with the words, "Or wound this tree that ravisheth his lord?" A rope was attached to Absolom somewhere, and someone concealed in the gallery drew him up. Henslow in his diary, makes a note on October 3rd, 1602, "Pd. for poleyes and workmanshipp for to hang absolome XIIII^{d}."

A turf is mentioned in the Old Wives Tale by George Peele; a turf is removed, and a light and a glass

shown. The stage directions of the Hector of Germany by W. Smith, give the following: " Enter in the Garden, Floramell the Lord Clynton's Daughter, and young Fythwater. They sit on the bank.""This bank was probably some box affair covered with green stuffs, or it was painted green. In the Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington, "Curtain open: Robin Hood sleeps on a green bank and Marian strewing flowers on him". In The Tragedy of Hoffman by Henry Chettle, Lodowick says:

"This is the Chappell, and behold a banke,
Covered with sleeping flowers, that misse the Sunne."

And Endymion says, in the play by that name written by John Lilly, "On yonder bank never grew anything but Lunary, and hereafter I will never have any bed but that banke." He falls asleep.

In this latter play a fountain is seen on the stage. Geron. says, "You need not for recure travell farre, for whoso can clearly see the bottom of this fountaine, shall have remedie for anything." A little later Eum. replies: "Father, I plainly see the bottome, and there in white Marble engraven these words, 'Aske one for all, and but one thing at all.' " In the Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe, "A curtain is drawn and David discovers Bethsabe bathing over a spring." There must have been trees or boughs hanging over this spring, for references are made to them: "To play the wanton with us through the leaves.", and "what tree, what shade."

Tents were set up on the stage. In Tamburlain the Great Part II by Christopher Marlowe, we have the stage directions: "Amyras and Celebinus issue from the tent where Calyphas sits asleep". In the Devil's Charter "Barbarossa bringeth from Caesar's Tent her two Boyes " and "Caesar discovereth his Tent where her two sonnes were at cards." In the Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe, someone "goes to his pavillion. He unfolds pavillion." According to Schmidt, a pavillion is a tent. In A Woman is a Weathercock, we have a canopy mentioned. "Scudmore passeth one door and entereth the other, where Bellafront is in a chair, under a taffaty canopy." In the Wondor of Women, "A treble Violl and a bass Lute play softlyd within the Canopy." These canppies may have been set up on the stage near the front, but it is more likely that they were back of the arras.

Animals and birds were brought in on the stage. These were either alive or stuffed. In the Love of King David, Absolom says: "Set up your mules, and give them well to eat." In another play, Every Man Out of His Humor by Ben Jonson, "Enter Puntarnolo, a Huntsman with a Graihound;" again, "Paris shepherd hath a lamb, and Fauna's hunter hath a fawn."

We find mention made of the smaller properties being used, such as lights, torches and lanterns; music, viols, lutes, organs; pictures for the walls; books; hour glasses. In fact everything that was necessary to

produce the play effectively are found.

With all the mechanical devices known to the Elizabethans, and with the elaborate costumes, the plays were made effective. But we find after careful survey of this period that the plays were given for their educative value and not for the external appearance merely. Shakspere, more than any other dramatist, realized the importance of subordinating scenery to the action and to the lines; and it is this spirit of the true dramatist that has characterized his works and has made them of such value as they are to the student of drama today. In the days of Elizabethan greatness the drams did not belong to the stage mechanism.

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